

Tenants battle back

Brownsville residents boot dealers & rats, reclaim homes

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Betty Vereen stepped over addicts shooting heroin in the halls of her Brooklyn apartment building every morning.

More than 100 people lined up outside to buy heroin, crack or cocaine from dealers selling narcotics from vacant units in the Noble Drew Ali Plaza in Brownsville.

One dealer even commandeered 20 apartments, selling about 2,000 glassines of heroin - \$20,000 worth of drugs - a day, authorities said.

"You couldn't go outside without seeing a buy," said Vereen, a retired cook for the city Department of Education who has lived in the complex for more than 25 years. "Children couldn't play in the building's courtyard."

Paulette Jackson-Forbes, the head of the tenants association, said the living conditions were horrendous.

Tenants endured rats the size of small dogs, months without heat and hot water, garbage piles in the hallways, broken elevators, ceiling holes and pit bull fights in the courtyard. Mailboxes were ripped out of walls.

"We were treated like animals," said Jackson-Forbes, 47. "I don't know anyone who ever lived this bad."

Many housing experts believed Noble Drew Ali - a 385-unit, five-building complex at the corner of Mother Gaston Blvd. and New Lots Ave. - could not be saved.

But tomorrow, construction begins on a \$23 million renovation of the complex, now owned by former Mets slugger Mo Vaughn. The improvements will include 400 security cameras, new kitchens, bathrooms, hardwood floors, elevators, ceilings, mailboxes, front doors and appliances, officials said.

Shaun Donovan, the head of the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development, said the reclamation of Noble Drew is "one of the biggest success stories in affordable housing history."

Getting there was long and difficult.

Accused slumlord Abdur-Rahman Farrakhan bought the troubled Noble Drew from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development for \$10 in 1996.

Farrakhan, a former candidate for state assembly, used the Muslim brotherhood, a group of men dressed in suits and bow ties, to intimidate tenants into moving out, tenants said.

He then rented apartments to the city Department of Homeless Services for \$126 per night - more money than the tenants had paid in rent.

Farrakhan partnered with another Brooklyn landlord, Zvi Kaufman, to manage the process, city officials said.

In 2002, Kaufman's building management company, Eshel Management, handed eviction papers addressed to "Jane and John Doe" to more than 125 Noble Drew tenants on Section 8, a federal program that subsidizes apartments for tenants with low incomes, tenants said.

"In some cases, people illegally evicted from Noble Drew were brought back to a vacant apartment in the same building the next night as a homeless family," said Mimi Rosenberg, the Brooklyn legal aid lawyer who galvanized the tenant group and shepherded their five-year battle to get rid of Farrakhan and find new ownership.

After the city found 1,300 building code violations at several Farrakhan properties in the Brownsville area, the Noble Drew Ali Plaza tenant association picketed City Hall and appealed to Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz.

Tenants also rented a giant rat to place at the entrance of their building complex and took up to 30 days off from work per year to attend city, state and housing court proceedings.

"I grew up here," said Jackson-Forbes. "I remember when this place was beautiful with grass and there were benches everywhere. We had to get it back to that."

Farrakhan declared bankruptcy and gave the property up to receivership, city officials said. Farrakhan and Kaufman did not respond to requests for comment.

"Now the problem was finding a new owner," recalled Rosenberg. "I read how Mo Vaughn and his company specialized in refurbishing distressed properties without evicting tenants, and I called."

Omni NY, the former big league star's real estate development company, had looked at the deal previously. It was appealing - except for the \$16 million Farrakhan owed in back taxes. Initially, they passed.

The city stepped in. Working with financiers from New York's Housing Development Corp. to provide tax-free bonds, Donovan got the Department of Finance to waive the back taxes. The sale to Vaughn's company, which has already refurbished more than 1,200 housing units in New York state, cleared this year.

And in June, police swooped into Noble Drew, completing a year-long investigation that netted 35 drug dealers, some as young as 15, police said.

"This is a long process," Vaughn said. "These are tenants who have been beat on for a long time. We're going to show them what kind of good can come their way."

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